

Carnival and Black American Music as Counterculture in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Jazz*.

Inger-Anne Søvting

University of Bergen

Toni Morrison's novels portray black communities and her portrait gallery consists predominantly of black characters. There are few open conflicts between the black and the white culture in her novels but this should not lead us to believe that she avoids dealing with this issue. Culture and cultural differences are central in all of her novels although their manifestations form such a natural part of the texts and are so elegantly distributed in both story and characters that we may not at first be disturbed by their presence. Our immediate interest is in the characters and their lives and through this we become acquainted with the underlying power struggles in the black communities of the texts. Morrison's novels explore the ways in which different values and conflicting ways of life interrelate and affect each other, and the main focus here is on the way the dominant society directly or indirectly interferes in and imposes itself on black culture.

In Morrison's novels glimpses of what could be called a "good life" manifest themselves textually in two ways; through the presence of a carnivalesque sense of life and the presence of African American musical forms. In her novels carnival erupts as an alternative to white bourgeois American culture and signals an ideology which stands as a contrast to the compartmentalization of contemporary commodity society. African American music is, at least historically, a quintessentially black American expression and it has long been a source of reference for

black American authors. Morrison herself has suggested that black literature, inspired by the form and underlying ideas of black music, shall take over the function this music used to have: "That music is no longer *exclusively* ours; we don't have exclusive rights to it. Other people sing it and play it; it is the mode of contemporary music everywhere. So another form has to take its place; and it seems to me that the novel is needed by African-Americans now in a way it was not needed before."¹ Black music is thus a counter expression, an alternative to the ways of Western expressive forms. The essential ground for communication between carnival and music, ostensibly different textual approaches, is their concern with openings, ambiguities and plurality. Carnival in its most literal sense symbolizes this plural diversity through the participation of masses of people in a spectacle where everything is possible and where opposites are easily reversed. A similar philosophy is expressed through the different genres of African American music; through the ambiguity of blues, the polyphonic spontaneity of jazz and the explicitness and irreverence of funk. Geographically and culturally distinct though they may be, carnival and black American music present us with similar systems of symbols for textual analysis and they also share a common denominator in their function and importance in an earlier society. Before exploring aspects of Toni Morrison's portrayal of society, let us consider briefly the background and ideology of carnival and African American music.

In his book *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin looks beyond bourgeois modern culture and aesthetics and focuses on the culture of laughter in the Middle Ages, an element of culture which "was accorded the least place of all in the vast literature devoted to myth, to folk lyrics, and to epics."² In his reading he observes a system of reference founded on the culture of the common people, of the lower classes in the social hierarchy. The folk culture of laughter is by Bakhtin considered an opposition to the seriousness of the medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture. It can be considered a people's counter culture which reveals "the unofficial aspect of the world."³ This folk culture is found in carnival and other

1 Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation." In Mari Evans. *Black Women Writers (1950-1980)*. (New York: The Anchor Library, 1984), p. 340.

2 Mikhail Bakhtin, (1929). *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 4.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 191.

similar medieval festivities and its manifestation can be divided into three modes of expression:

1. Rituals and spectacles: carnival pageants, comic shows Or the market place.
 2. Comic verbal compositions: parodies both oral and written, in Latin and in the vernacular.
 3. Various genres of billingsgate: curses, oaths, popular blazons.
- These three forms of folk humor, reflecting in spite of their variety a single humorous aspect of the world, are closely linked and interwoven in many ways.⁴

Typical features of carnivalism are the low, the grotesque and the excessive; in short, the "unspeakable" unofficial aspect of the world. This is combined in the grotesque style: "Exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are generally considered fundamental features of the grotesque style."⁵ Carnavalesque grotesqueries and profanities are double-bottomed. In all carnivalistic laughter, language and symbols there is an inherent duality or ambiguity. Oppositions are closely linked and their positions are often inverted. Birth is linked with death, laughter with sorrow, praise with abuse, the sacred with the profane, and the spiritual with the carnal—to list but a few of the frequently recurring oppositions: Related to this pattern of binaries is a focus on the cyclical movements of the world and on fertility. Death and consumption are always pregnant with new life and the philosophy of carnival is therefore essentially positive and optimistic.

As a culture of the masses carnival functioned as a loophole from the severity and discipline of everyday life. The very nature of carnival is highly ambivalent. On the one hand it was culture in which the people *participated*: "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people."⁶ It was solely linked to feasts and during these feasts the people could join together in joyful celebration. It was a time when no official regulations restricted their movements. On the other hand these feasts were permitted by the administrative forces. The people's freedom lasted only as long as the authorities would allow it. Thus the feeling of freedom was, ultimately, only an illusion and there was no real element of catharsis involved. Duress and frustration were temporarily suspended

4 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* ([1965]Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 5.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 303.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

but not extinguished. Carnival itself was the festive part of the people's everyday life: "But the basic carnival nucleus of this culture is by no means a purely artistic form nor a spectacle and does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art. It belongs to the borderline between art and life."⁷

African American music, like carnival, occupies an ambiguous position between art and everyday life. It is a folkloristic tradition which derives from a people that to a much greater extent than the people of feudal Europe, was subjected to authoritarian control. Blues is the oldest of these genres and it is, according to Amiri Baraka, "the product of a sub-culture."⁸ In its earliest days blues was not considered an art form and, much like carnival, it was not performed *for* the people but lived by them. The roots of the blues, the hollers and the work songs, had a social function and were closely connected to everyday life. Similarly to carnival, it functioned as a safety valve which was coopted by the dominant society to redirect popular dissatisfaction. To its performers it was a means of coping. Unlike carnival, it was not linked to public feasts and blues does not express the frivolous and loud festive sentiment which is so characteristic of carnival. It nevertheless expresses an unquestionable ambivalence which is often found in the discrepancy between tone and message. Frederick Douglass writes about the slave songs, the roots of the blues: "The thought that came up, came out—if not in the word, in the sound;—and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone."⁹ This ambivalence echoes the ambiguity at the heart of the very existence of both carnival and blues.

Blues is not the only African American genre of importance in Morrison's novels. At least two other genres of black American music are central in her texts and these also represent facets of existence which are prevalent in carnival. These genres are jazz and funk. Both could be said to derive from blues but they have developed in different directions. Jazz is an urban mode of expression and it is harder and crueller than

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Amiri Baraka, (Leroi Jones). 1963. *Blues People* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), p. 141.

⁹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* ([1845] London: Penguin Classics, 1986), p. 57.

blues. Although there are several different variants of jazz there are at least two features which are common to all these—polyphony and improvisation; the participation of a plurality of independent voices in the spontaneous act of creation. Funk is a more recent musical form, one that has always been considered of less artistic value than blues and jazz. “Funk” is originally a Flemish word which meant stench. In England it came to mean “strong fear” while in the black ghettos in America it was also given clear sexual connotations. It referred to the smell of sexual excitement and in particular it referred to the female sex. The musical expression called funk has preserved these overt connotations to sex and other “unspeakable” issues. Through its provoking directness it communicates an explicit defiance of bourgeois codes.

Music and carnival are central both in *The Bluest Eye*¹⁰ and in *Jazz*¹¹ but the treatment of the relationship between black and white culture differ significantly in these two novels. The problematization of the black/white duality in American society is strongest in her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. The polar existence of these two cultures is visible on the macro-level of the novel in the coexistence of two distinctly different texts; what is often called the primer and which I will refer to as the pre-text, and the main text which tells the story about Claudia, Frieda and their friend Pecola. The pre-text is an alien piece of text which confronts the reader with a superficially perfect and stereotype world. This world is, one might infer, a white construct. It represents an other which the main text indirectly is forced to deal with and seeks to resolve. Its interference is most explicitly visible as headlines in the main text but it is also present within the main text as rigid and dominating laws representing a real and forceful threat to the black self. Concrete manifestations of its ideology are the doll Claudia dismembers, the Shirley Temple mug and the Mary Jane chocolates. These objects symbolize an ideal for female beauty which all black women are forced to submit to. Claudia rejects these white artifacts but Pecola, the victim of Western culture, is fascinated and intoxicated by them.

The effect when this ideology is enforced on other cultures is disastrous and leads to alienation from one's self and from the true pleasures of life, as evident in the women from Mobile, “who do not drink, smoke,

10 Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*. ([1970] London: Picador, 1990)

11 Toni Morrison, *Jazz*. ([1992] London: Picador, 1993).

or swear, and they still call sex 'nookey'" (64). These women are alienated from their own culture and take on the masks of the dominant, reified, white culture. They have learned to suppress what is uncultured, natural and physical: "Wherever it erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away; where it crusts, they dissolve it; wherever it drips, flowers, or clings, they find it and fight it until it dies" (64). Not only do they try to conceal these unofficial sides of life, they even try to obliterate them and pretend they do not exist. Geraldine, a woman "from Mobile, or Meridian, or Aiken" (67), is completely alienated from bodily pleasure. All it represents to her is an obstacle to her sterile, impeccable appearance:

While he moves inside her, she wonders why they didn't put the necessary but private parts of the body in some more convenient place—like the armpit, for example, or the palm of the hand. Some place one could get to easily, and quickly, without undressing. She stiffens when she feels one of her paper curlers coming undone from the activity of love; imprints in her mind which one it is that is coming loose so she can quickly secure it once he is through. She hopes he will not sweat—the damp may get into her hair; and that she will remain dry between her legs—she hates the glucking sound they make when she is moist. When she senses some spasm about to grip him, she will make rapid movements with her hips, press her fingernails into his back, suck in her breath and pretend she is having an orgasm. (65-66)

Many of Morrison's female characters struggle with an alien ideology which will not accept them on their own terms. In *Tar Baby*¹² Jadine feels inauthentic when she sees the dark woman in the yellow dress coming into the shop. This feeling of inauthenticity is synonymous with cultural alienation and it arises when the characters try to function within a system which is incompatible with their own culture. The problem becomes even more complex because Jadine has absorbed too much of the dominant culture to function within a society strongly based on black culture. She is brought up in a white family and is educated to function in a Western cosmopolitan society. Her conflict is partly due to her own biculturality; she is "both/and" but also "neither/nor"—she cannot entirely identify herself with either of the two cultures. One crucial difference between Geraldine and Jadine is that Jadine, in contrast to Geraldine, is aware of the ambiguity of her own cultural position.

12 Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby*. ([1981] London: Picador, 1991)

The most pronounced victim of society's rules in *The Bluest Eye* is Pecola. She is blinded and enticed by the idealized white world. She drinks cup after cup of milk just to be able to suck in the image of the yellow-haired and blue-eyed girl on the mug. She goes through the humiliating experience of confronting the "fifty-two-year old white immigrant storekeeper" who "does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see" (36) in order to buy the Mary Janes with the picture of a pretty white girl on their wrappers. The pleasure she gets from devouring the candy is complete but nevertheless false: "She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candies is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. Three pennies had bought her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane. Lovely Mary Jane, for whom a candy is named" (38). Here the language of the narrative significantly adopts the rigid and lifeless style of the pre-text. Geraldine is fighting back real pleasure because its seriousness frightens her. Pecola does not hold back but her pleasures are based on false principles. The chocolates are manufactured products designed according to certain standards in society and represent an ideology which cannot, and will not, include Pecola—her position in relation to this ideology will forever remain marginal. Pecola in this respect points forward to another of Morrison's female characters, Hagar in *Song of Solomon*,¹³ who literally goes shopping for a new self—a self which cannot be her.

The alternative to Pecola's blind infatuation with and Geraldine's entrapped existence within the ideology of white America is most explicitly found in the whores, China, Poland and the Maginot Line (also called Marie.) Here the presence of music and a carnivalesque sense of life are strongly felt. Poland is the blues singer and she carries on the old tradition of blending the sweet and the sad:

I got blues in my mealbarrel
 Blues upon the shelf
 I got blues in my mealbarrel
 Blues upon the shelf
 Blues in my bedroom
 Cause I'm sleeping by myself (38)

However, it is not only the presence of music which signifies the authenticity of the whores' lives. Their parts of the text are also saturated

13 Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*. ([1977] London: Picador, 1989).

by a true carnival sense of the world. Grotesqueness and laughter are closely connected in carnival, and laughter is one of the fundamental components of carnivalized literature. True carnival laughter is non-authoritarian and non-hierarchical; nothing is exempted from ridicule and everyone can laugh at anything. It is universal and ambivalent and it purifies from dogmatism and pedantry. It represents a sphere of freedom—a loophole from the severity of everyday life. China, Poland and the Maginot Line represent the center of carnival in *The Bluest Eye*, a novel which, on the whole, is not filled with the liberating force of laughter. Their laughter has all the qualities of true carnivalesque laughter:

All three of the women laughed. Marie threw back her head. From deep inside, her laughter came like the sound Of many rivers, freely, deeply, muddily, heading for the room of an open sea. China giggled spastically. Each gasp seemed to be yanked out of her by an unseen hand jerking an unseen string. Poland, who seldom spoke unless she was drunk, laughed without a sound (40).

The Maginot Line put a fat hand on the folds of her stomach and laughed. At first just a humming with her mouth closed, then a larger, warmer sound. Laughter at once beautiful and frightening. She let her head tilt sideways, closed her eyes, and shook her massive trunk, letting the laughter fall like a wash of leaves all around us. Scraps and curls of the laughter followed us as we ran. (81).

Their laughter is free and unrestricted and each laughs in her own characteristic way. It is grotesque as well as merry and is frequently directed towards the person laughing. This is illustrated in the story Marie tells about the first time she was given a pair of drawers and put them on her head while dusting because she did not know their purpose. She defends herself with "And what's the use of putting on something you have to keep taking off all the time?(41)". The comic crown of this anecdote, the drawers, may suggest the carnivalesque reversal of the reigning order in the world. Marie is the clown in her own story and she does not mind being so. Carnival images of the body are often related to the body's apertures and orifices. This is where the body opens up and interacts with the world and from this derives the carnivalesque image of the body as unfinished and open. The dialogic cyclical process of the body is represented through eating, drinking, digestion and sex. The carnivalesque body is also characteristically grotesque and this grotesqueness is closely related to the body's excessive relationship to

the categories mentioned above. The Maginot Line's body is as close as we come to a carnivalesque image of the body in *The Bluest Eye*:

A mountain of flesh, she lay rather than sat in a rocking chair. She had no shoes on, and each foot was poked between the railing: tiny baby toes at the tip of puffy feet; swollen ankles smoothened and tightened the skin; massive legs like tree stumps parted wide at the knees, over which spread two roads of soft flabby inner thigh that kissed each other deep in the shade of her dress and closed. A dark-brown root-beer bottle, like a burned limb, grew out of her dimpled hand. She looked at us through the porch railings and omitted a low, long belch (79).

Her body is excessively fat and it is grotesque. Much attention is paid to her feet, feet which significantly, are swollen; they bulge outwards and strive to extend her body. Bakhtin contends that the grotesque "is looking for that which protrudes from the body, all that seeks to go out beyond the body's confines. Special attention is given to the shoots and the branches, to all that prolongs the body and links it to other bodies or to the world outside."¹⁴ The idea of the whores as representatives of a good life appears like a gross paradox; they use their bodies for commercial purpose, they drink and they are rejected by the rest of the black community who find their display of the unofficial side of life intolerable. The exception is the children who are fascinated by them because they have not yet learnt the mechanisms of the hierarchical society. The whores' response to the surrounding society is a refusal to conform and they are not, as Geraldine and Pecola, victims of alienation. Their happiness is ambiguous but they have a humorous and ironic perspective on their own situation. Other, but more subdued and therefore more commonly acceptable, manifestations of the "good life" are found in Claudia's family and in the young Pauline and the young Cholly. In the house of the MacTeers it is the women who provide a whole and all-inclusive attitude to life. In between her complaints and harsh reprimands Claudia's mother represents laughter and music. Her blues shine through in the discourse of the adult Claudia as memories of her childhood. These bitter sweet blues are about the "somebody-done-gone-and-left-me-times" (18) and the seductiveness of her mother's voice makes the young Claudia long for the pains of adulthood: "Misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother's voice took all the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only

14 Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, pp. 316-7.

endurable, it was sweet" (18). In Mrs. MacTeer laughter *is* music: "The water gushed, and over its gushing we could hear the music of my mother's laughter" (23).

A carnivalesque attitude to life is also visible in the young Claudia's sensations and perceptions. She is not restricted by the hierarchical conception of the high and the low, the appropriate and the inappropriate. In this scene, which also relates to the organic body and the cyclic nature of all being, Claudia shows a wonderful ability to take delight in and be fascinated by what she perceives:

The puke swaddles down the pillow onto the sheet—green-gray, with flecks of orange. It moves like the insides of an uncooked egg. Stubbornly clinging to its own mass, refusing to break up and be removed. How, I wonder, can it be so neat and so nasty at the same time? (6).

Claudia sees something beautiful in the puke, to her it forms an interesting picture of colors on her pillow and she is attracted to the ambivalence of it being both sweet and nasty. Her mind reveals a freedom of association, the same freedom which makes her able to take delight in the colorful spectacles performed by the whores. Claudia is the only character in this novel who consciously makes an attempt at deconstructing the ideology of the dominant society. This is seen in her dismantling of the dolls:

I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable. Break off the tiny fingers, bend the flat feet, loosen the hair, twist the head around, and the thing made one sound—a sound they said was the sweet and plaintive cry "Mama," but which sounded to me like the bleat of a dying lamb, or, more precisely, our icebox door opening on rusty hinges in July. Remove the cold and stupid eyehall, it would bleat still, "Ahhhhh," take off the head, shake out the sawdust, crack the back against the brass bed rail, it would bleat still. The gauze back would spilt, and I could see the disk with six holes, the secret of the sound. A mere metal roundness (14).

This passage is one of the most important paragraphs in the novel. Not only does it serve to characterize Claudia but it also underlines a theme in the novel; the deconstruction of the white cultural myth. Claudia's act of taking apart the doll and discovering its superficiality and "mere metal roundness" is synonymous with the text's act of undressing the inadequacy of the pre-text.

Pleasure is central to an authentic life in Morrison's world. In "Rainbows and Brown Sugar" Barbara Hill Rigney contends that "in Morrison's texts, food, like everything else in her worlds, is metaphoric, diffusely erotic, expressive of *jouissance*."¹⁵ Perhaps the most pronounced instance of this is found in Morrison's second novel, *Sula*: "It was not really Edna Finch's ice cream that made them brave the stretch of those panther eyes....The cream-colored trousers marking with a mere seam the place where the mystery curled. Those smooth vanilla crotches invited them; those lemon-yellow gabardines beckoned to them (50)."¹⁶ Houston A. Baker humorously remarks, "Surely, Edna's mellow confections appear more like the male equivalent of the blues' 'jelly roll' than Baskin-Robbins' twenty one flavors."¹⁷ In *The Bluest Eye* the combination of *jouissance* and food is merely suggested in the opening of the section called "Summer": "I have only to break into the tightness of a strawberry, and I see summer—its dust and lowering skies" (147). In the scene where Cholly as a young boy shares a watermelon with a man called Blue it comes closer to the explicitness in *Sula*. The sexual connotations in this scene are inescapable:

Blue jumped. "Aw-awww," he moaned, "dere go da heart." His voice was both sad and pleased. Everybody looked out to see the big red chunk from the very center of the melon, free of rind and sparse of seed which had rolled a little distance from Blue's feet. He stooped to pick it up. Blood red, its planes dull and blunted with sweetness, its edges rigid with juice. Too obvious, almost obscene, in the joy it promised.... Together the old man and the boy sat on the grass and shared the heart of the watermelon. The nasty-sweet guts of the earth (105).

Rigney describes the watermelon as "a metaphor for love, an emblem for female sexuality."¹⁸ Carnival ambivalence as well as the ambivalent relationship of the blues to the sweet and the bitter is present in this passage. The contrast to Pecola's chocolates is significant. The watermelon is succulent and healthy—it is the guts of the earth. Susan Willis argues that Morrison through the use of metaphor "defamiliarizes the portrayal

15 Barbara Rigney, *The Voices of Toni Morrison*, (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1991). p. 83.

16 Toni Morrison, *Sula* ([1973] London: Picador, 1991).

17 Houston A. Baker, Jr. 1993 (1990). "When Lindbergh Sleeps With Bessie Smith: the Writing of Place in *Sula*," in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah, 1993. *Toni Morrison. Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (New York: Arnistad, 1993), pp. 244-5..

18 Rigney, *The Voices of Toni Morrison*, p. 83.

of sensual experience.”¹⁹ The sensuality Rigney points to as a characteristic of Morrison's fiction, Willis calls "eruptions of funk" and funk in her sense of the word does not only denote sexual pleasure but pleasure in general: "orgasm (which we might take as a metaphor for any deeply pleasurable experience)...." Funkiness is something she associates with black culture and the absence of funkiness in a black person is a result of cultural alienation. She further maintains that: "Morrison writes to awaken her reader's sensitivity, to shake up and disrupt the sensual numbing that accompanies social and psychological alienation. This is the function of her 'eruptions of funk'"²⁰ The young Pauline, in sharp contrast to Geraldine, is one of the characters able to feel these eruptions of funk and who do not reject the funk but take pleasure in it:

That streak of green from the june-bug light, the purple from the berries trickling along the thighs, Mama's lemonade yellow runs sweet in me. Then I feel like I'm laughing between my legs, and the laughing gets all mixed up with the colors, and I'm afraid I'll come and afraid I won't. But I know I will. And I do. And it be rainbow all inside (101-102).

Her associations are of colors, berries and rainbows—natural uncultured objects and ideas. These bodily sensations are described in concrete and familiar terms and in this lies the aspect of defamiliarization; "Mama's lemonade" can hardly be seen as a frequent connotation of sexual sensations. In Pauline's mind there is no clear distinction between pleasures derived from eating, from experiencing scenery and from sex. Her pleasure is wholesome and all-inclusive; the reflections of a noncompartmentalized and carnivalesque mind which is able to take in the polyphonic nature of existence. This experience is something Pauline reminisces; at the moment of speaking she is no longer able to feel these sensations. In *The Bluest Eye* carnival and music erupt as signals of an alternative to the dominant culture but these signals are not unproblematically allowed to surface. Their obstacle is the restrictive ideology of the dominant culture and in this novel this is present primarily through reified objects or products, such as the doll, the Shirley Temple mug, the Mary Janes and, not to forget, the rhetoric of the pre-text. The episode taking place after Aunt Jimmy's funeral is the only instance where the dominant intrusion is a concrete act of interference:

19 Susan Willis, "Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison," in Gates and Appian, *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives*, p. 308.

20 Ibid., pp. 308, 323.

The funeral banquet was a peal for joy after the thunderous beauty of the funeral. It was like a street tragedy with spontaneity tucked softly into the corners of a highly formal structure. The deceased was the tragic hero, the survivors the innocent victims; there was the omnipresence of the deity, strophe and anti strophe of the chorus of mourners were lead by the preacher. There was grief over the waste of life, the stunned wonder at the ways of God, and at the restoration of order in nature at the graveyard.

Thus the banquet was the exultation, the harmony, the acceptance of physical frailty, joy in the termination of misery. Laughter, relief, a steep hunger for food (112).

During the banquet Cholly and the girl Darlene are playing around in the grass and their play develops into an encounter with sexuality. The funeral feast as setting for their sexual initiation underlines the carnivalesque importance of the cyclical nature of existence and the interrelatedness of life and death. The arrival of the white men destroys the carnivalesque essence of the events: "There stood two white men. One with a spirit lamp, the other with a flashlight. There was no mistake about their being white; he could smell it" (116). These white men force Cholly to complete the sexual intercourse while they are watching and their interference makes him impotent. The effect of this episode on Cholly illuminates the complexity of the cultural conflict. Instead of directing his hatred towards the white men Cholly hates Darlene who is as much a victim in this situation as he is: "Sullen, irritable he cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless" (118). This parallels what happens with Pecola in the black community when it makes her a scapegoat, although she, least of all, is to blame.

Morrison's latest novel, *Jazz*, is significantly different from *The Bluest Eye*. While the presence/non-presence of carnival and music in *The Bluest Eye* served to indicate a division of the black community in small town Ohio in two, there is no such split social structure in *Jazz*.²¹ Here Morrison has largely abandoned the device of directly juxtaposing white and black culture. The novel is primarily a portrayal of black American urban culture and black human relationships. We encounter a society that seethes with passion and internal conflicts, but which also, towards

21 *Jazz* reappropriates the black cultural aspect of the American Jazz Age and towards the end of the novel we are reminded of the other world, the world of Long Island debutantes and sparkling parties. This world is, however, only present as a silent contrast to the black community.

the end, is shown to imbue close human ties. As the title indicates, black American music is at the heart of this novel, both structurally and thematically. The presence of black music is not markedly stronger in some sections than in others but fills the whole novel and the reader is never allowed to forget its existence. Musicians hover in the background of the text setting the scene like stage properties in a play: men float "down out of the sky blowing a saxophone" (8) and "[b]lind men hum in the soft air as they inch steadily down the walk" (119). The migration into the City is described in terms which give associations of some communal musical celebration: "They were dancing. And like the million others, chests pounding, tracks controlling their feet, they stared out the windows for the first sight of the City that danced with them" (32). *Jazz* can be read as a reincarnation and reappropriation of jazz as a black artistic expression. The period in which the novel is set, the American 1920s, is commonly known as the Jazz Age and in literature it is frequently associated with the "poor-rich-boy-stories" of Scott Fitzgerald. His settings, the rich white society, show an environment which is diametrically opposite to the poor black ghetto in the Harlem of *Jazz*.

One characteristic feature of this novel is its polyphonic narrative structure and one of the main differences between *The Bluest Eye* and *Jazz* is the way these voices are structured. In Morrison's latest novel all the central characters take part in telling the story, even the dead girl Dorcas. At first impression the situation may remind us of an orchestra where the omnipresent Voice is the conductor but as the narrative reliability and the powers of the Voice gradually weaken, the narrative scene becomes more akin to the independence of musicians in a jam session. The voice of the "I" sometimes partly fuses with that of the characters and it becomes difficult to decide on the identity behind the voice. This non-exclusive polyphony, the way the voices are structured, or rather, are not structured, resembles the spontaneity and the anarchic nature of carnival festivity. The City reflects this polyphonic narrative technique. It is frequently personified and could be seen as one of the main characters in this novel. The "I" convincingly assures us that he has "seen the City do an unbelievable sky.... But there is nothing to beat what the City can make of a night sky. It can empty itself of surface, and more like the ocean than the ocean itself, go deep, starless" (35). With all its people and all its streets the City is like a jazzy carnivalesque

market place full of possibilities and temptations. It is a place where anything can happen and its forceful freedom is dangerous for those who are not careful and on guard against its persuasiveness. Closely connected to the freedom and spontaneity of jazz is the presentation of the unofficial side of life—the abrupt provoking atmosphere of funk: "The dirty get-on-down music the women sang and the men played and both danced to, close and shameless or apart and wild" (58). Again the City with its characteristics is of prime importance. It is described as "smelling and good and looking raunchy" (64). It is sexy and greedy and the message it conveys is directness and physical attraction rather than love and tenderness. Alice Manfred observes this sentiment and is frightened by it:

Yet Alice Manfred swore she heard a complicated anger in it; something hostile that disguised itself as flourish and roaring seduction. But the part she hated most was its appetite. Its longing for the bash, the slit; a kind of careless hunger for a fight or a red ruby stickpin for a tie either would do (59).

It is against this background that Joe sees and falls for Dorcas and she is described as his personal sweet, his candy. In his dramatic monologue Joe addresses Dorcas directly: "I *chose* you. Nobody gave you to me. Nobody said that's the one for you. I picked you out" (135). The City offers the opportunity to choose your love in a way you cannot do in the country. While Pauline and Cholly met over a country fence "[t]he woman who churned a man's blood as she leaned all alone on a fence by a country road might not expect even to catch his eye in the City" (34). It is a freedom which implies competition.

In *The Bluest Eye* blues lyrics appear as quotations in the text and are thus set apart from the discourse of the novel. In *Jazz* blues is an essential feature of the novelistic discourse and is inextricably linked to the "I": "Pain. I seem to have an affection, a kind of sweettooth for it" (221). The indirect omnipresence of blues through the narrative voice of the "I" reflects the carnivalesque openness of this novel. Blues, as jazz and funk, does not exist isolated in certain "chunks" of the text but is integrated in the discourse of the novel. All characters and episodes convey the blues and its medium is the "I". The blues is to the "I" an almost Gothic experience; dark, horrible, mysterious, and yet strangely sensual, and the story he tells is a tragic love story which ends in bloodshed. The essence of this love story is akin to what Bakhtin calls *carnivalization of*

passion, which is evidenced first and foremost in its ambivalence: "love is combined with hatred, avarice with selflessness, ambition with self-abasement, and so forth."²² At the heart of most of the amorous relationships in *Jazz* is a problematic ambiguity. To Joe Dorcas is the "young good God young girl who both blesses his life and makes him wish he had never been born" (40). Who loves and who hates whom is the insoluble knot in "the mystery of love" in *Jazz*. Are Joe and Dorcas really in love or are they merely taking advantage of each other? Neither is it clear whether Violet hates or loves Joe, it even seems as if her hate for Dorcas, which made her want to tear up the girl's face, has changed to love: "not only is she losing Joe to a dead girl, but she wonders if she isn't falling in love with her too. When she isn't trying to humiliate Joe, she is admiring the dead girl's hair; when she isn't cursing Joe with brand-new cuss words, she is having whispered conversations with the corpse in her head..."(15). There are no clear boundaries between love and hate. Barbara Hill Rigney notes that "Morrison's novels are always about love and its distortions, and also about slaughter, often *with* the blood; but rarely do they reflect a purely traditional 'Western notion' in which desire is repressed, compartmentalized, set apart from the rest of experience, defined, and psychoanalyzed."²³ Written before the publication of Morrison's latest novel, this statement appears to foreshadow the situation in *Jazz*. Possibly only in *Beloved* is the relationship between love and hate and love and violence as complicated as it is in this novel. Love, in *Jazz*, is never easy but its pain is closer to the individualized bittersweet of classical blues than to the communal pain of the slave song.

Language to the Voice is like music to the musician. Instead of describing things directly he often uses language to create images and scenes which communicate certain atmospheres. The conscious use of rhythm is a central feature of his language and this is particularly important in his depiction of the City. The hurried rhythm of urban language and the rhythm of the City itself is illustrated in this rambling section:

Songs that used to start in the head and fill the heart had dropped down, down to a place below the sash and the buckled belts. Lower and lower, until the music was so lowdown you had to shut your windows and just suffer the summer sweat when the men in shirt-

22 Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 159.

23 Rigney, *The Voices of Toni Morrison*, p. 83.

sleeves propped themselves in window frames, or clustered on rooftops, in alleyways, on stoops and in the apartments of relatives playing the lowdown stuff that signaled Imminent Demise (56).

The narrator slows the rhythm down when his story requires it, as he does here when he turns to one of his characters, Alice Manfred: "Alice, however, believed she knew the truth better than everybody. Her brother-in-law was not a veteran, and he had been living in East St. Louis since before the War. Nor did he need a whiteman's job he owned a pool-hall" (57). The change of rhythm is particularly significant here since Alice Manfred is the character who has the greatest problems accepting the life and ways of the City.

In *Jazz* there are no obsessive conformists like Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye*. All of the characters are strong individualists who refuse to conform to any forced patterns. Most of the characters behave in ways which can be described as more or less irrational. One of the clearly "deviant" characters is Violet. She deviates from customary norms of behavior and is considered an eccentric, or even, crazy by the community. About one of the carnivalized literary genres, the Menippea, Bakhtin writes:

Very characteristic for the Menippea are scandal scenes, eccentric behaviour, inappropriate speeches and performances, that is, all sorts of violations of the generally accepted and customary course of events and the established norms of behavior and etiquette, including manners of speech.²⁴

Violet's oversteppings are many: she steals someone else's child, apparently in a semiconscious state; once she inexplicably "stepped back and folded her legs in order to sit down in the street" (23); after Joe killed Dorcas she throws out her birds, canaries and the parrot; she keeps the photo of the girl her husband has killed on a shelf to look at; and last, but not least, she breaks up Dorcas' funeral and tries to rip up the dead girl's face. The Voice refers to Violet's eccentricities as "cracks" — "ill-glued cracks and weak places beyond which is anything" (23). Her cracks are not explained, and her character is surrounded by an air of evasive mystery. She is the soloist who breaks out of the context which frames her.

24 Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 117.

The Voice is a carnivalesque center in *Jazz*. As narrator he is an eccentric in that he deviates from the expected norm attached to his role. He is gullible, or so we are led to believe, pompous and insecure. Bakhtin's description of Dostoevsky's narrators could have been the description of the Voice: "The narrator—a 'certain person'—is on the *threshold* of insanity (delirium tremens). But that aside, he is already a person *not like everyone else*; that is, he is one who has deviated from the general norm...." ²⁵ Morrison's narrator is not *merely* a character, nor is he *merely* a narrator but he occupies a medial position. His oxymoronic status is that of a personalized non-personal first person narrator. He is strangely non-temporal and non-spatial at the same time as he apparently has the power to be everywhere at anytime. What takes place in *Jazz* could be seen as a parody both of the traditional omniscient narrator and of the modern third person narrator with restricted insight/view. Through his pompous and intentionally self-reflective comments the Voice in fact unintentionally ridicules himself. "Alone, yes, but top-notch and indestructible..." (7) he confidently says, apparently unaware of the display of conceit his remarks convey. He has a jazz musician's liberties and the same unrestricted opportunity to reverse reality as a participant in a carnival procession.

There is no laughter in *Jazz* in the same way as there is in *The Bluest Eye* but there is, nevertheless, more humor. In Morrison's first book the unambiguous tragedy of Pecola's destiny checks every growing surge of laughter in the reader. In *Jazz* ambivalent laughter is possible because there is no firm tragic center. Although the events in themselves are serious many of them convey a touch of the comic and open up for what Bakhtin calls *reduced laughter*. Seriousness is highly ambivalent, as is laughter. The initially tense and hostile scene between Violet and Alice, the woman whose niece has been killed, ends in free and relieving laughter. It reflects what Bakhtin calls the "serious smiling": "Violet learned then what she had forgotten until this moment: that laughter is serious. More serious than tears" (113). Much of the humor in *Jazz* is related to grotesque images, as this description of Alice Manfred's late husband:

Somewhere in Springfield only the teeth were left. Maybe the skull, maybe not. If she dug down deep enough and tore off the top, she could be sure that the teeth would certainly be

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

there. No lips to share with the woman she had shared them with. No fingers to lift her hips as he had lifted others. Just the teeth exposed now, nothing like the smile that had made her say, "Choose." And he did (85-86).

This image of Alice Manfred's dead husband as a grinning corpse with its teeth as its most prominent feature is as grotesque as it is ludicrous. Equally grotesque is Alice Manfred's feelings toward the woman who stole her man away:

Her craving settled on the red liquid coursing through the other woman's veins. An ice pick stuck in and pulled up would get it. Would a clothesline rope circling her neck and yanked with all Alice's strength make her spit it up? Her favorite, however, the dream that plumped her pillow at night, was seeing herself mount a horse, then ride it and find the woman alone on a road and gallop till she ran her down under four iron hooves; then back again, and again until there was nothing left but tormented road dirt signaling where the hussy had been (86).

The excessiveness of her feelings evokes the air of menacing comedy. In spite of the cruelty we may feel inclined to laugh, half ashamed, as we read this passage.

On the whole *Jazz* can be seen as a celebration of black urban culture and the title no doubt invites this interpretation. The novel is saturated with a carnivalesque and all-inclusive presence of black music. However, not even in this novel is the reader allowed to escape the conflict of two clashing cultures and ideologies. In spite of the presence of African American music and carnivalesque traits there is a symptom of illness at the heart of the story and this illness is again due to a dominant and alien culture which imperceptibly is rooted in the minds of the characters. One of the few places where we directly encounter aspects of this dominant threat is in what appears as an interpolated story in the main story, the section of the text that deals with Golden Gray and Wild. Golden Gray could be seen as the epitomization of Western beauty with his yellow curls, gray eyes and golden skin. He is mixed but there are no characteristic black features present in the description of him. True Belle used to tell stories about him when Violet was a child and the image of him has lived on in Violet's mind ever since. Not only Violet but also the Voice is very much preoccupied with Golden's presence: "I've thought about him a lot, wondered whether he was what True Belle loved, and Violet too" (143). The Voice's description of him is highly prejudiced; he sees him as selfish, cold and insensitive—though

beautiful. This is a view he adjusts towards the end of his story: "What was I thinking of? How could I have imagined him so poorly? Not noticed the hurt that was not linked to the color of his skin or the blood that beat beneath it. But to some other thing that longed for authenticity, for a right to be in this place, effortlessly without needing to acquire a false face, a laughless grin, a talking posture" (160). Golden's disturbing presence indirectly pervades the story. It distorts some of the characters' perception of identity and it also, as shown, interferes in the Voice's narrative reliability. Violet realizes that her idealized image of this golden boy has played a part in the problems she and Joe have had in their relationship preventing her from seeing and understanding Joe on his own terms. The power of the ideology represented by Golden is shown through the uncertainty and disturbances his presence in the story creates.

Golden Gray is in this section of the text contrasted by his exact opposite; Wild, the woman who lives in the forest and in an almost surrealist manner their stories merge. Golden Gray is the epitomization of civilized, urban white beauty—of culture as something cultivated—while Wild represents wildness and "ultimate blackness"—the idea of uncultivated nature. She is the image Joe has carried with him of his mother who left him when he was but a child. The image Violet has of Golden Gray and the image Joe has of his mother distort their conceptions of reality and of each other. The text complicates and negates the autonomy of Golden and Wild and the values they represent. They are brought together in the characters' minds and this merger is accentuated through their illogical existence within the same story in the text (in this story Golden actually meets Wild who supposedly is Joe's mother). They cannot be distilled as separate qualities, all attempts at doing so leads to confusion. This illustrates the complexity and ambiguity of biculturality and also in this novel Morrison resists the temptation to simplify racial and cultural relationships.

The main issue in Morrison's novels is the portrayal of African American culture, a culture that constantly fights against a cultural other which threatens its authenticity. This is reflected in her characters' quest for an identity which both is acceptable to them as individuals and which also the public society will accept. Black culture is textually present as a counterculture through the plurality and all-inclusive openness

of carnival and African American music. In Morrison's novels these elements are signals of a good and genuine life.

Through her focus on folk culture, both in thematics and in narrative form, she follows in the tradition of Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston was, wrongly, accused of pleasing her white audience through presentations of the "happy-go-lucky darkie." In contrast to most of her black contemporary authors Hurston insisted on her right to write novels about individuals, black individuals, without addressing the color question directly—a right which white authors took for granted (no one expects of a white or "ethnically neutral" American author that he or she shall address the conflict between cultures.) Morrison also writes about black individuals in love and pain but her novels are clearly more political than Hurston's. Moreover, she has on several occasions made statements to the effect that she intends her novels to be political. At one time she resisted the term *magical realism* as a descriptive label for her fiction as she felt that it undermined the political aspects of her texts: "It was a way of *not* talking about the politics. It was a way of *not* talking about what was in the books."²⁶ There is, however, no political or ideological short cut to a solution because the black and the dominant culture in America are so closely intertwined. *The Bluest Eye*, through its inclusion of threatening alien cultural objects, is that of her novels where she comes closest to diagnosing the presence of the evil influence. *Jazz* is that of her novels where the cultural boundaries are most obscure and it is also as close as Morrison has come to a happy ending. *The Bluest Eye* ends with death and resignation: "We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much too late." *Jazz* ends with an open chord and a germ for continued life and growth as the book refers itself to the reader and asks to be born: "Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are now." The ending of *Jazz* emphasizes the mutually dependent and creative relationship between the reader and the text.

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26 Toni Morrison, "Interview With Toni Morrison" (By Christina Davies) in Gates and Appiah, *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives*, p. 414.

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27 *Ibid.*